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## The last rites for rustic Romania

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In rural Romania, EU membership is set to transform a way of life unaltered in generations. **MARTIN FLETCHER** reports. Pictures by **DAVID BEBBER**

# A village that time forgot

I have discovered Heaven. It is not a tropical island or a manicured resort for the rich and famous. It is a peasant village high in the hills of Romania, the newest and poorest member of the European Union and alleged home of Dracula, vampires and the tidal wave of gypsies, thieves and illegal immigrants allegedly heading Britain's way.

Its name is Matau (pronounced "Matsow"). Its homes of carved wood and patterned plaster are topped by hay lofts, encircled by orchards, enclosed by picket fences. They have views across a deep valley to the forests and snowy peaks of the Carpathian mountains — home of wolves, bears, chamois and wild boar. The winter air is scented by woodsmoke and dung. The silence is broken only by cowbells, the bleating of sheep and, at dawn, cocks crowing.

The soldier and author Patrick Leigh Fermor, who passed close by on his epic walk from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople before the Second World War, would find little changed. The big-handed, leather-faced, pungent-smelling subsistence farmers of Matau still live much as their ancestors have for generations.

They keep a few cows, pigs and chickens in their yards. They grow potatoes, onions and carrots. They cut grass with scythes and make haystacks. Early each summer they drive their sheep to the high pastures. In the autumn, grandparents, parents and children harvest apples, plums and pears, and in the copper vats of the village's three stills they turn the plums into *tuica* "brandy". Their cellars are full of fruit, potatoes, meats smoked in their outhouses, cheeses in sheep skins, and great barrels of *tuica*.

Walk Matau's mud lanes (the concrete road peters out in the village) and you meet horse-drawn carts hauling firewood from the forest, donkeys bearing milk churns, children driving cows to drinking troughs. Old women carry home water from wells in buckets hanging from sticks across their shoulders. Perhaps 20 of Matau's 500-odd

homes have running water. There are ten tractors in a "commune" of 1,800 people. There is one police car, and a police bicycle with a red-and-blue flashing headlamp.

Romania may now share laws, institutions and external borders with Britain, but Matau is 1,200 miles (1,931km) and several light years from London. My teenage daughter spends more on a pair of shoes than most of its inhabitants earn in a month, yet it has a character as strong as its sheep's cheeses, and a generosity to match.

My photographer, translator and I found the mayor's office near the school, whose blackboards, wooden desks and cloth maps recall those in England c 1950, and next to the war memorial, which makes no distinction between those villagers who died fighting with the Nazis and, after Romania changed sides in 1943, with the Allies. We explained that we wanted to spend a few days in Matau to explore the impact of EU membership, and in minutes we were being toasted with glasses of fiery plum brandy.

Soon the deputy mayor, Ion Zipis, had installed us in his home. The rest of the week passed in a blur of astounding meals — every mouthful produced within a stone's throw of where we sat — as the villagers welcomed us into their homes.

This paradise is not unblemished. For a

start, Matau, like the rest of Romania, is no place to be either a Roma (gypsy) or gay. "You shouldn't write about gypsies. They're not worth it," I was told after visiting some Roma hovels a few miles away. The women are hardly emancipated, and Ion Damian Postoaca, the mayor, cracked sexist jokes that would have him drummed from office in Britain. Though nobody will say so publicly, it is also prudent to offer doctors and officials "gifts" in return for their services.

They won't be able to sell their cheeses outside 'the immediate locality' and must take their animals for slaughter up to 40km away

Nor will this paradise last, for Matau's outward serenity masks the fact that it is on the cusp of great change. Less than two months after Romania joined the EU, edicts from Brussels are threatening to destroy its way of life. The young are leaving for better-paid jobs in Western Europe. And just over the crest of the hill above Matau, bulldozers are churning up the meadows to create a ski run and holiday resort.

One of our protracted lunches took place in the home of Ion Sulca, a 70-year-old shepherd with bright red cheeks, clear blue eyes, a mouthful of gold and silver teeth and a loudhailer voice. He was wearing a jumper, trousers and jacket made from the wool of his sheep. The floor was covered in sheepskin rugs. The table was laden with sheep's-milk curd, sheep's cheese, salted mutton, chunks of smoked pork fat and thick slices of *toba*, a terrine made from pig's innards. As we ate and talked, his beaming wife bustled in with plates of steaming *bult* — balls of polenta with hot, oily sheep's cheese seeping from the middle.

By then our host was well away. "I don't see anything good coming from the EU," he boomed. "All these products you see — I won't be able to sell them. From what I can see the EU is worse than communism."

In fact Matau escaped relatively lightly during Ceausescu's 24-year rule in Bucharest, 100 miles away. It successfully resisted collectivisation of its farms. A doctor in

Campulung Muscel, the town in the valley below, helped to thwart Ceausescu's attempts to turn Romania's women into baby machines by performing clandestine abortions. And if Matau had Securitate informers, nobody seems to know who they were. Ion Lupascu, 94, remembered being called in as he passed the police station in his cart one day. "They asked me to be their man. I said I was far too busy looking after my farm," he laughed.

But our host had a point. Matau is awash with tales of EU rules. Some are untrue — that graveyards must be outside the village boundaries, for instance. Some are government edicts, such as a ban on horse-drawn carts on larger roads. But some do emanate from Brussels and will directly affect the commune's 400-odd farmers.

In future, for example, they will be taxed on any *tuica* they produce in excess of 50 litres for personal consumption. Soon they will not be able to sell their cheeses outside their "immediate locality" unless they upgrade their outhouses. And they will have to take their animals for slaughter up to 40km away instead of slitting their throats.

These changes will cause great hardship in a village where barely a third of inhabitants have salaried jobs and €200 (£135) a month is a good wage. Few have enough land to qualify for EU farm payments, or to compete with factory farms. Even as the Continent embraces organic farming, they may be forced to pool their resources in a belated "collectivisation".

Ion Visiou earns €260 as the village engineer. His wife, Vasilica, tops up the family income by selling 30 to 40kg of home-made cheese in Campulung market each week, and about 300l of *tuica* each year. "It would be hard without my income," she says.

**Emigration is another threat.** About 100 villagers, like two million of their compatriots, had left to work illegally in Western Europe before Romania joined the EU, but the mayor expects the exodus to accelerate now that most of the Continent — Britain excepted — has dispensed with the need for work permits.

There is little to keep them in Matau. Campulung's two biggest employers, its coalmines and a four-wheel-drive factory, were closed as Romania reformed its economy in preparation for EU membership.

One evening I sat in one of Matau's three



Ion Visiou, the village engineer, fetches hay for his cattle. All Matau houses have hay lofts





**T** Paradise Lost? See David Bebber's portfolio of pictures from Matau [timesonline.co.uk/europe](http://timesonline.co.uk/europe)



Above: villagers leave offerings in church on the Saturday of the Dead. Top, from left: Dorin Marea by his ski-lift; a farmer draws water from a well; Ion Lupascu, 94, astride a cart

tiny shops for an hour and talked to the customers. Christian, 36, who earns €120 a month as a car mechanic, leaves for Germany next month, where he has been promised €5 an hour as an agricultural worker. Adina Visiou, a 17-year-old high school student, wants to study in France — “All my friends want to go abroad,” she said. Aurel Burhan, 50, has a son earning €50 a day as a gardener in Rome, and a daughter earning €800 a month cleaning houses in Karlsruhe, Germany. His other son will go abroad when he finishes school. “He can’t get a job here,” Burhan said sadly.

You can tell the foreign workers by the state of their houses. Cecilia Anghel is adding another floor to hers. For three years her husband has earned €1,000 a month as a construction worker in Corsica — ten times what he earned delivering bread in Matau. During the summer she leaves their two young daughters with her parents-in-law and joins him, working as a hotel cleaner. “Here you have no future, even if you have qualifications,” she said.

The villagers speak more in sorrow than anger of Britain’s closed doors, with many blaming the “lazy, dishonest” Roma for

giving their country a bad name. But Britain is not their destination of choice: they prefer Spain, Italy and France, which are culturally much closer to Romania.

Most of the younger villagers have been taught in school civics classes that the EU is unequivocally A Good Thing, and they welcome the chance to travel and work abroad — though they insist that they want to return when they have made some money. Ion Lupascu, the 94-year-old, said he was proud that Romania had returned to the European mainstream — “Now it’s really, really good for us” — and Tudor Boambes, 47, the priest, agreed: “We are in a club with people who have experience of economic, political and social development.”

Others, mostly older, conceded that Romania had no choice if it wanted to join the modern world, but feared a loss of national identity. “The EU will break down our traditions,” said Ion Visiou, the village engineer, as we ate smoked pork and pickled mushrooms in his dark little kitchen.

That modern world is encroaching fast. Bucharest is awash with new malls, hotels and offices as foreign investment floods in. The two thirds of Romania’s economy that

is not agricultural is growing strongly.

Above Matau we met Dorin Mirea, the owner of a Campulung brick factory, standing on an expanse of mud beneath a newly installed second-hand ski lift from Italy. He heads a syndicate that has sunk €400,000 into the ski run, and intends to seek EU funds to develop it into a year-round resort.

It was the ‘Saturday of the Dead’ and villagers came in carts and on foot to light candles and cover the church floor with baskets

He envisions an hotel, a restaurant, tennis courts, swimming pool, mini-golf, horse-riding. “I have big dreams,” he said.

That vision is shared by Postoaca, Matau’s mayor. “It’s no good crying for the past,” he says. “We have to do something realistic for the future.”

He, too, has big ideas. He recently signed a contract to bring the internet to Matau.

He intends to apply for EU funds (Romania should receive some €20 billion over the next seven years) for paved roads, running water and a proper sewage system. He wants to promote agro-tourism, with villagers opening guesthouses and forming a co-operative to produce organic cheeses and *tuica* commercially. He foresees wealthy outsiders buying up land for holiday villas. Indeed, prices are climbing, and the first Briton has bought a house near the village.

He is right, of course. This is progress. And yet...

On our last morning we went to one of Matau’s three onion-domed Romanian Orthodox churches. It was the “Saturday of the Dead”, when the villagers remember departed family. They came in droves, on carts and by foot. As a novice priest chanted prayers they lit candles and covered the floor with wicker baskets of bread, apples and *coliva* — wheat puddings — decorated with crosses.

The villagers embraced friends and neighbours, crossed themselves as one, knelt as one and sang in sweet harmony. They were at peace with the past, with themselves and with nature. For how much longer?